In the recent presidential election, immigration vaulted from a sleepy, backburner issue to a hot topic as emotional reactions flared in response to Donald Trump’s Mexican wall proposal and his threats of massive deportations. Some invoked America’s history as a “nation of immigrants,” while others began looking askance at anyone with darker skin, a strange accent or a veiled face. “Fear of the other” stoked frightening memories of 9/11 terrorists crying Allahu akbar enroute to the Twin Towers. Regardless of the response to it, the campaign highlighted the issue of immigration.

Lost in the discussion, however, was much coverage about the plight of immigrants and the reasons for their willingness to undertake such perilous journeys. From the sketchy hygiene of tented refugee camps to the hardscrabble existence in a new land, refugees and immigrants face hardships few us can fathom. Two recent books provide pictures. One profiles one of the countries fueling the worldwide immigration crisis and the other one of the refugee camps that serves as home for the displaced.

Most immigrant stories start with chaos as civil order and economic stability crumble in the immigrant’s home country. Current poster child for countries in the throes of self-destruction is Syria, whose civil war has spawned 4.8 million refugees spread across Europe and the rest of the world and 6.6 million internally displaced, producing a refugee deluge not seen since World War II. In Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present, Middle East historian Christian Sahner presents an engaging history-cum-travelogue of Syria from medieval times to the beginning of the current civil war.

Sahner travels back historically to Damascus during the Umayyad rule in 701 AD, when Caliph al-Walid I razed a building where Muslims worshipped in the eastern end and Christians in the western and built a magnificent mosque and purged the Christians, establishing Islam as the “main show.” When he visits the mosque in the modern-day city, Sahner finds a shrine in the middle that reputedly holds the head of John the Baptist. A Christian saint honored in the midst of a Muslim mosque is a talisman for the complexity of religiosity that has existed in Syria for centuries. The mosque contains another head, that of Hussein, a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammed and forefather of today’s Shi’a, who was savagely defeated by the Umayyads at Karbala in 680 AD. Most Syrians are Sunni Muslim, yet they retain a shrine to a Shi’a hero in their primary mosque and Syria continues to have close ties with Shi’a-dominated Iran. Nothing is ever simple in explaining ancient or mod-
ern Syria, but Sahner makes the subject understandable and approachable.

The current civil war is also a complex political tangle, with the clash of government forces of Bashir al-Asad, a multiplicity of rebel forces including ISIS, and the military might of Russia and the United States supporting opposing sides. The current annihilation of Aleppo, which evokes the quote from the Vietnam era “To save the city we had to destroy it,” has added to the flood of refugees fleeing the conflict. They go to a different part of Syria, they go to Turkey, they cross over to Europe and a few make it to the United States. Their medical problems are a product of atrocious living conditions and a decimated medical system in what used to be a developed country.

Far from Syria in northeastern Kenya is Dadaab, the world’s largest refugee camp, housing 500,000 people. Ben Rawlence’s book City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World’s Largest Refugee Camp supplies a flavor of the hazards of life there. Violence around every corner, corrupt security forces and scant food supplies, despite the United Nation’s efforts, beleaguer the nine Somali people Rawlence follows through the book. For one, Isha, “hunger had become a normal thing … familiar with the bleeding gums, the inflamed limbs, the cramped pain of drinking, the torture when the empty stomach eats itself.” Medical care, supplied by the United Nations and Medecins Sans Frontieres, is a constant battle with sanitation and scarcity. Refugee camps are no place to get well.

City of Thorns is not an easy book to read. Partly, it’s its structure. With scattered chapters about the lives of its protagonists, it is hard to weave together a coherent narrative. And partly it’s the subject matter, with one shocking inhumanity after another. Yet Rawlence does articulately summarize the refugees’ predicament and the world’s response: “At a time when there are more refugees than ever, the rich world has turned its back on them. Our myths and religions are steeped in the lore of exile, and yet we fail to treat the living examples of that condition as fully human. Instead, those fleeing the twenty-first century’s wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere are seen as a potential fifth column, a threat.”

The chaos of Syria, Somalia and other refugee-spawning countries is far from the comforts of the United States, but their political, economic, medical and humanitarian tremors continue to shake us all. American physicians will see more patients carrying the physical and psychological scars of the refugee experience, challenging our medical prowess and our humanity. MM

Charles Meyer is editor in chief of Minnesota Medicine.

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